

Know Thy Avatar: Good and Evil in the Gaming World

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The Huffington Post:

The 2013 Ben Stiller film *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* is a remake of a 1947 Danny Kaye movie of the same name, which was itself based on a popular James Thurber story, first published in *The New Yorker* in 1939. The enduring appeal of this tale reflects the human urge to try on another identity, to be someone else for a time, to play act. Walter Mitty is an ordinary, boring fellow going about his very ordinary day, but in his rich heroic daydreams he is everything from assassin to fighter pilot to ER surgeon extraordinaire.

It's all good fun. But is it possible that such complete immersion in novel and extraordinary identities might have unintended consequences? Modern gaming technology has enhanced the fantasy experience in ways that Thurber could never have imagined, so that it's now possible to enter virtual worlds and, as avatars, assume not only the identity but the perspective of fantastic characters. Can the experience of "being" a heroic or villainous avatar nudge people toward uncharacteristic behavior later on, in real life?

Two psychological scientists at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Gunwoo Yoon and Patrick Vargas, were concerned enough about this possibility that they decided to explore it in a couple simple experiments. They began by recruiting volunteers and fooling them into thinking they were taking part in two different studies. One was a test of a new game, and the other was an unrelated taste test. In actuality, the scientists wanted to see if the gaming experience determined the way that volunteers treated others later on. The subjects played the game for five minutes, taking on either the heroic identity of Superman or the villainous identity of Voldemort. A third group, the controls, was assigned a neutral geometrical avatar — a circle.

Read the whole story: [The Huffington Post](#)

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